

# It's Time for Governors to *Think Babies™*



## Why Babies?

Governors have a proven way to build a healthy future for their states: investing in their youngest constituents. The science is clear – children's brains grow faster between birth and age 3 than at any later point in life, forming more than one million new neural connections every second. When babies have nurturing relationships with caregivers, high quality early learning experiences, and good physical health and nutrition, these neural connections are stimulated and strengthened, laying a strong foundation for school readiness and success in school and beyond.

Unfortunately, too many babies aren't getting what they need. Nearly half of America's babies live in or near poverty and many young children face a range of risk factors that can impede positive development. Without a focus on early development, public systems will pay more in the long run, in lower academic achievement, increased special education costs, higher disease rates, increased economic dependence, and higher criminal justice costs.

By championing high-quality programs and supportive policies that ensure parents and caregivers have the time and resources to nurture healthy brain development, governors can make an investment with long-term social and economic returns. In addition, policies that support families can more immediately boost the state's economy by making the state a more appealing place for families to live and work.



## The Role of Governors

Governors who *Think Babies™* are highly visible and vocal champions for infants and toddlers with a commitment to ensuring that necessary resources are allocated to the policies and programs that support them. A governor who champions the needs of babies will:

- Be familiar with the data about how infants and toddlers in their state are faring;
- Be bold and think beyond the way things have always been done to develop systemic solutions that improve child outcomes;
- Convene legislators from across the aisle to advance a vision of building a great state for babies; and
- Ensure that state administrative structures reflect this commitment to babies, including representation focused on infant-toddler issues at the cabinet level.



## The First 100 Days and Beyond

The first 100 days lays the groundwork for a governor's focus on infant-toddler policy priorities. A governor can first assess how well the state is currently supporting infants, toddlers and their families and identify and champion specific strategies for making improvements by taking the following steps:

- Putting a process in place to consult with agency staff, community leaders, professionals delivering infant-toddler services, and parents during the transition period and early in the administration to better understand state system strengths and gaps.
- Appointing agency leaders who have expertise and understanding of infant-toddler issues, and appointing state leaders qualified in infant-toddler policy to existing state governance bodies concentrating on the broader early childhood continuum (such as Early Learning Councils) to ensure a focus on infant-toddler priorities.

- Engaging with existing groups focused on prenatal-to-three policy, if they exist, to determine how new initiatives can build on previous work.
- Creating a new group tasked with developing recommendations for improving services and systems that support infants, toddlers and their families (if a group does not already exist).
- Declaring a commitment to prenatal to three in State of the State inauguration speech.
- Including funding increases for services and systems that support infants, toddlers and their families in the proposed state budget. This includes prioritizing services that are recommended during the exploration stage, which could include:
  - the child care subsidy program and quality improvement system;
  - evidence-based, voluntary home visiting programs;
  - infant and early childhood mental health services;
  - Early Head Start expansion;
  - nutrition and obesity-prevention programs;
  - child welfare practices and systems;
  - adult health and mental health services that support pregnant women and parents of young children; and
  - systems that efficiently screen and connect families to needed supports.

After this collaborative exploration and analysis stage, governors can pursue specific policy improvements, such as:

- Launching a First 1,000 Days initiative to bring stakeholders together to explore how state Medicaid could better support very young children and their families.
- Charging agency leaders with developing a proposal to create or strengthen a state paid family leave program for new parents and champion it in the legislature.
- Announcing and promoting funding for a new signature infant-toddler initiative that will address infants' and toddlers' comprehensive needs and address gaps in services in the state.
- Examining participation in nutrition programs, such as SNAP and WIC, which are critically important for pregnant women and very young children, to identify and address barriers to enrollment.
- Charging all state agencies, including those that do not directly serve children, to use a multi-generation lens when implementing their programs and identifying specific actions they can take to better support individuals who are parents of very young children.
- Leveraging federal funding and grant opportunities to strengthen services and systems that improve outcomes for infants, toddlers and their families. This may include the new Family First Prevention Act, Child Care and Development Block Grant, or Medicaid expansion funds.
- Embedding a developmental approach in child welfare services to ensure that systems serving infants and toddlers, who have experienced abuse or neglect, are focused on promoting positive early childhood development. Governors may consider launching or expanding Safe Babies Court Teams, an evidence-based community engagement and systems change approach to improve how the courts, child welfare agencies, and other child-serving organizations work together, with a shared goal of improving outcomes for infants and toddlers.

With gubernatorial elections taking place in 36 states this year, newly and re-elected governors will have a critical opportunity to be champions for babies. By taking these policy actions that recognize the importance of positive infant and toddler development, governors can make an important investment in their states' future students and workforce.

### About the *Think Babies™* Campaign

ZERO TO THREE created the *Think Babies™* campaign to make the potential of every baby our national priority. Through *Think Babies™*, ZERO TO THREE and partners are raising awareness of what children ages 0 to 3 need to thrive and building the will necessary to advance federal and state policies that improve outcomes for infants and toddlers, beginning with those furthest from opportunity. For more information, see: <https://www.thinkbabies.org/>.